

I can't live, if living is without you.

We've all heard [the song](#). Starts off with a soft and emotional rendition of a sorry soul full of desperation and devastating heartbreak. The lyrics are cheesy, melody uninteresting, and mostly forgettable until you hit that killer orchestral hook the first time you hit the chorus. From there, it comes down to the singer's delivery of the aforementioned tag-line, and I ain't ever heard anyone do it better than Aunty Ray. She's got a beautiful voice, clear and dramatic without so much as a touch of her accent, and the passion and raw emotion she puts into her performance of the song always leaves me in a stupor. It's a bold and forthright declaration of vulnerability and co-dependence that can't be all that healthy, and yet her delivery of the lines makes me want something like that for myself.

Love songs are full of cheesy lines like that. [All out of love](#), I'm so lost without you. [Every time](#) you go away, you take a piece of me with you. I'm [never gonna dance](#) again, guilty feet have got no rhythm. Aunty Ray's performance always sells the song, but when Chrissy plays the melodies without anyone singing along, it's clear how terrible some of those songs really are. Course, the words only make it worse when you read them without the music, and I've spent many an hour out on the road listening to melodies and making fun of those songs, because it all seemed so dramatic and silly.

Not anymore. [I can see clearly now](#), because [I'm walking on sunshine](#) up [top of the world](#). I got not one, but two beautiful [brown eyed girls](#) who've got me singing Sha-la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la, la-la tee-da. Thought all them love songs were exaggerated and over dramatic, but I get it now, because with highs this high, I can't even imagine the lows, and I hope I'll never have to.

Ain't all sunshine and rainbows of course, because soon as I drop the girls off back home, the Catholic in me starts feeling immense guilt over it all. Not only is lust a sin, I done gone and lusted twice. That's like double the sin, which while double the fun, is also double the trouble. There's also the fact that like all good things, this will eventually come to an end. That's the pragmatist in me speaking up, compelling me to face facts and accept that this can't last forever. Though Noora told me not to be so serious and Josie was most certainly an eager and willing participant, I can't help but consider all the angles. Sure, we're all having fun in the sun down at the range, but where do we go from here? Polygamy is illegal in the United Federation of American States, while polyamory is seen as deviant and downright heretical even. There are whole settlements here on the Frontier started by Mormons and other polygamists just so they can live in peace, and people still whisper about them like they worse than outlaws. Also, how am I supposed to bring not one, but two girls home to meet Auntie Ray? Never mind how she done already met the both of them. It's one thing to have a barbeque where Noora and Josie are present, and another altogether to have my girlfriends, Noora and Josie, over for dinner.

Should I be swapping their names around every now and then, so Noora don't always come first? Hang on. Are they even my girlfriends? I mean we done things only married couples are supposed to do, but among three people, not two, so I don't know where that leaves us. With a ménage à trois, as the French would say, or a house of three, so does that mean I gotta go Métis to make this work? I hope not, because if I had to choose an old world Nation to be a part of, it'd be the good old U.F. of A. Not to cast aspersions on our bilingual northern neighbours, but I spent the first fourteen years of my life thinking of myself as an American. Even though they wronged my daddy, it wasn't all of American whodunnit. Was just policy from a bunch of politicians, and wasn't much of anything we could do to fight it, so I don't really have a grudge against Americans or nothing. I just didn't want to be one no more, because only then could I show them what they missed out on by disrespecting my daddy so.

Hasn't worked out all that well so far, and truth is, I don't ever see it paying off. I'm stubborn though, so unless there a reason for me to get my citizenship, I'll stay Frontier born thank you very much.

Fun fact, Noora's got the same designation, because she lost her papers when her parents died, so she had to get new ones here in town. Problem is, wasn't no one who could vouch for her nation of origin, so she's Frontier born too. Not Josie though. She's Mexican American, meaning she gets dual citizenship. I wonder if

Mexico got laws against polygamy. I should find out, though Lord knows how I'd go about it. Maybe ask around down in New Sonora?

What am I doing? One afternoon fling with two lovely, enthusiastic young ladies and I'm already sizing them both for wedding rings. Noora's right. I am too serious.

Then again, this is serious business. What if one of them gets pregnant? The Contraception Cantrip is only 99% effective, which still leaves a chance. Not a large chance, but still a chance. Am I ready to be a daddy? Would love to have a kid. A daughter I think, because even though I'll never admit it, Auntie Ray ain't wrong to say I was a handful. And that's putting it nicely, because the Padre had me dead to rights when he called me the terror of these streets. Only when my daddy wasn't around though, because he was a stickler for discipline and kept me in line. Yea, a daughter first would be best, then a son after, because then he wouldn't be the oldest and the only man. Lot less weight on his shoulders, more room to breathe, and it'd let my daughter learn how to be strong and independent while looking after her little brother.

... I keep at this any longer and I'll be picking out names soon enough. Should at least settle on a wedding venue first.

After dropping Josie and Noora off at their place, I got plenty of time before I'm expected at the church, so I stop off at the jewellery store on my way home. Just for a quick look-see through the window is all, because even if it's too early to be buying wedding rings, I don't feel right having skipped over so much of the courtship process. Haven't even bought them dinner, much less jewellery, but I'm thinking a threesome deserves something nicer than flowers. Then again, if I do buy them something expensive, are they gonna think I saw our dalliance as transactional? Because I don't, and even though I don't know where any of this is gonna go, I very much want to pursue... whatever this is.

Life's complicated.

Still don't hurt to take a look and think about it, but the problem with Aberrtin reinforced glass is it's tinted, which makes it difficult to see the goods. Taking off my hat, I lean in close to the window to try and see what they got on offer, but even though I can make out the rings, necklaces, bracelets and other jewellery sitting in the window, they lack that sparkle to really draw you in. Me, I never understood why some gemstones are more expensive than others, even though only a few are useful in Spellslinging. Who wants a sapphire set in a ring when you can get an Aberration Cold Stone instead? The sapphire just looks shiny, while the Cold Stone lets you cast Spells which need the Stone as a Spell Focus. I been meaning to get me one for a while now, but seeing Michael's pinky ring kinda threw me off. Man had the right idea,

but why wear it on his pinky? Just comes across as a little feminine is all. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but still. I figured a man in the mob would be more conscientious about his masculinity is all.

"You Howie?"

Speak of the Devil and he appears. Well, not Michael exactly, but men who I assume are associates of Michael, seeing how they all dressed the part, with fine wing-collared shirts and black silk vests under long leather overcoats. Topped with a fedora of all hats, worn with a rakish tilt I envy, though the white feathers in their hatbands sort of ruin the whole thing. There are five in total, mobsters and feathers both, with three to my left and two to my right, showing they know which side is more dangerous. What they don't understand is how Cowie is the real threat here, as the men to my left all got their backs to him, which is really just a terrible idea.

"Huh," I say, looking at the man who spoke for a good long second as I start recording with my bull's head medallion, then put my hat back on. "Ask me again."

The leader don't like it, me telling him to do something, but he does it all the same. "You Howie?"

“Yea, I thought that’s what you asked.” Scratching my chin, I point at the guy to get my hand in frame, so the recording clearly sees I ain’t about to go for my gun. Fat lot of good that’ll do me if they choose to gun me down in the street, but the recording could be enough to keep Cowie from getting put down for avenging my death. “You know you the first person who ever asked me that?” It’s true too, or at least I think it is. “Most either ask if I’m the Firstborn, because they heard stories about me before, or they ask for a name ‘cause they don’t know me at all. Ain’t ever actually been asked if I’m Howie. Ain’t that a lark?”

“Good for you,” the mafioso growls. “Someone wants a word.”

“Cattywampus.” Takes him a moment to figure the joke out, and he don’t find it amusing, but that’s fine by me, because I’m tickled pink. Man’s got a square jaw to end all square jaws, one made more prominent by the grizzled scruff of a permanent five o clock shadow he got going on. Got the face of a man who six foot nine, but a body that tops out at five foot five. Ope, five three, now that I clock the lifts, while his buddies are all larger and taller than he. Now, I ain’t one to make fun of a man’s height, because glass houses and all, but I doubt the Mafia is as forgiving. Seeing how this pint-sized mobster’s associates all respect him despite his lacking stature, I can only assume he’s a mean, murderous son of a gun because he had to work extra hard to earn that respect.

Which of course only makes me want to tease him all the more. "Truth is, I think it's a little odd that people ask at all," I continue, picking up where I left off like he never said a thing. "I gotta imagine that if someone knows about me, or is looking for me, they'd have a description to go on. Wouldn't even need much of one really. How hard is it to spot the one Qink within a-hundred clicks of New Hope?" Turning about to face the pair, I ignore to the square-jawed leader entirely, which he really don't like at all, but now I got the pair on my left and the trio on my right, which I much prefer. "Then again, there's a Nip boy who lives here in town. Only fourteen but looks twenty-three. Got facial hair and everything, so I could see some folks mistaking him for the Firstborn. Still, that gives you what, 50-50 odds of getting it right on the first oriental you see, so is it really that big of a gamble to assume I'm who you think I am?"

Course, I could also bring up the two-tonnes of Transmuting bull standing not three metres away who's another dead giveaway of my identity, but I'd much rather they continued to ignore him. The big guy is real cranky and tired after our trip out to the range, so he's quietly asked if he can stomp these fools three times already. Not because he knows they Mafia. All he knows is they've stopped me on the street and I'm making ready to fight, so he's ready to break skulls and go home.

"All right wise guy," the mini mafioso growls. "C'mon. Let's go."

“Fraid you caught me at a bad time.” Giving a little shrug while looking left and right, I say, “Got dinner plans on the hour, so I’ll have to take a raincheck.”

“It ain’t up to you.” Channeling all the rage and violence of a career criminal out of his dark, beady eyes, the mini mafioso cracks his neck and plants his feet while keeping his hands folded in front of his stomach. “We can do this the easy way, or the not so easy way, but either way, you coming with us.”

Spoken like a man who’s had everything go his way, and seeing how he’s still drawing breath, there’s probably good reason why. Man’s got a proper quick draw stance going, and judging by how his shoulders are turned ever so slightly to his left, I’m guessing it’s a cross draw for a gun on the left side of his waistband. Left hand sweeps the jacket out the way, right hand grabs the gun, bang bang done. Not the speediest draw, but allowances gotta be made for the fact that he probably don’t got a license to carry and had to pick one up from a contact in town. Means he can’t be showing it off while walking around town, because the Sherriif do be stickler for proper registration.

Course, I give the signal to Cowie and the mini mafioso will never get his gun clear of his holster. Same goes for the two goons standing with him, while I’m fairly confident I can gun down the pair on my left before they draw on me. Problem is, that’s quite the escalation, and while I ain’t afraid of the Mafia, I ain’t exactly

looking to wage war against them either. Too much risk with no reward, especially if they got ties to Ranger High Command keeping them entrenched in Mount Rimes mining industry.

So I do something I rarely do, because it smacks of weakness. I try to negotiate. "How about we talk this through," I begin, shifting my stance to match his, though I don't turn my back on the pair to my left since they're my first targets. Don't want them to know that though, so a little misdirection can't hurt. "Let's say, hypothetically, I say I'm good with not so easy. Then what huh? You gonna gun me down here in these streets? Because if you pull that gun you got hidden in your jacket there, that's what you gonna have to do. I play for keeps friend, and here on these streets, there ain't no winning for you."

I give him a smile and a shrug, all calm and relaxed as can be. He sees it too, knows I ain't making no bluff, and he don't like that because I done called him on his. Him and his were just trying to scare me into compliance, because that's how the Mafia works, but ain't no way they can hope to getaway from a shoot out on the main thoroughfare of New Hope. Soon as the first shot is fired, someone will sound the alarm, most likely the manager of the jewellery store whose got front row seats to the fight. Once that happens, every gate out of town gets locked down tight, while every off-duty Ranger in the area will pop on over to see what all the fuss is about. Even if these mafiosos can drop me and walk away, there's no getting away, not here in the heart of the town so far from any gate.

And that's if they're dealing with an everyday average joe. They ain't, and they know it, so even if they ain't afraid of what I can do, they're understandably concerned about my connections. The Marshal is a good man who's well respected by all, criminals and law-abiding citizens alike, so if he puts out a call for blood, then this mini mafioso's bosses will likely give him and his friends up just to avoid all out war. Yea, the Pugliano Family might have ties to Ranger High Command, but they all the way over on the West Coast. The Marshal though? He runs New Hope and the Blue Bulwark both, and while he'd never abuse his authority for a personal matter, he won't stop at nothing to apprehend the criminals responsible for my death.

Like I said, the world is ruled by fear. Everyone does it, governments and criminals alike. The only difference is how they handle things, in which a government will typically only act with legal justification, and killing me will give Uncle Teddy all that he needs to uproot the Mafia from our borders. That's my edge here, the fact that the Mafia fears the Rangers more than I fear the Mafia, and the mini mafioso knows it now.

So now all that's left to do is give him a good reason to back down, one that doesn't make him look weak and afraid. "So what's this about then?" I ask, once it's clear no one actually wants a fight. "How I done spooked Michael? When a stranger approaches the work site, you can't rightly blame me for showing

up armed and ready to fight. It's a dangerous world out there, and I weren't to know he had business with Carter. Thought we left things off cordial enough, but what? I hurt his feelings or something?"

"Some funny business went down after you met," the mini mafioso says, watching me close for my reaction. Ain't him I'm concerned about though. It's the beanpole to his left, the one who done just cast a Detect Heartbeat Cantrip to see how I'd react, but my heart is beating slow and steady as always. "We're thinking you maybe might've seen something on your way home."

"Last Saturday?" I shake my head and grimace. "I was bleeding from my every which way out of my face the whole trip home, so I didn't see much of anything that morning." That takes them by surprise, and me too, because I would've thought they'd've done their homework.

"What you mean bleeding?"

"What's it sound like?" I shrug. "Got hit with a Mind Whip during the Abby attack. Doc called it a subconjunctival hemorrhage, I call it bleeding out my eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Carter and two of his boys brought me home, and we got in around lunch, but we didn't see hide nor hair of no one the whole way back."

“Start from the top,” the mini mafioso says, still projecting aggression, but well on the back foot. “After you and Michael part ways at the compound Friday, what’d you do then?”

So I tell the story like me and Carter rehearsed it. I ate lunch and worked late, then stayed over at the compound to sleep only to be attacked by Abby a few hours before sunrise. By now, I’ve complete confident Joseph and his two pals carried out the attack by themselves, with no fourth or fifth person who got away clean. I didn’t make no secret of my injuries neither, so it won’t take much for them mafiosos to confirm it. Wouldn’t put it past them to have a source in the town guards either to confirm my time of return and the extra Aberrtin I brung in, so as long as mental or Spiritual attacks ain’t in Joseph’s wheelhouse, then I should be in the clear.

Carter too hopefully, but is it terrible of me to hope the Mafia tries something stupid? Though our interaction was limited, I get the feeling miss Amelie ain’t as tolerant as her husband, and I would love to see the look on Michael’s face when she transforms into a diamondclaw and rips him to shreds.

As expected, the mini mafioso checks with the beanpole to confirm I’m on the up and up, but it takes a bit more than a conversation to get my heart pounding. Far as they know, I’m telling the truth, and if they dig a little further, they’ll see that I

usually spent Friday nights at the compound anyways. Only came back home early once for Tina and Chrissy's birthday, but the Mafia ain't interested in the nitty gritty details, only the facts, and they got none to finger me as whodunnit. To really hammer home the point, I tell them, "Look, I don't know what you looking for, but I ain't running or hiding neither. I live here in town, and I'm headed to Mueller's Quay Monday to look for more work and finish my hours. If you still got questions, you know where I'll be, and I'll even give you answers so long as you ask nicely."

That's enough to satisfy the mini mafioso's ego, because now they can say I crumbled and answered, even if I didn't go with them. "One last question," he says, pushing his luck because he feeling cocky. "What happened in Pleasant Dunes, hmm?"

I give him a glare and take a deep breath, letting the anger leak out from where I got it locked up tight, and they all go alert to see it. After leaving the tension to hang in the air for a good half minute, I say, "Man had a bunker full of chemical explosives. What you think happened?"

"Nah, not about that." Gesturing at the stump of my right hand, he asks, "Why'd he take your hand?"

"Because his pet Ranger on payroll done robbed him," I snarl, having long since committed to the lie. "Then pinned the blame on

me.” All of which sounds feasible enough, because while it’s true I had the skills to cover up a murder like that, so did Wayne, and without Ronald Jackson’s trust of his hometown buddy, most would suspect the Ranger, not the kid. Wayne knew about the precious cargo after all, so he’d have reason to go after the merchant, whereas I was just a bystander who happened to be riding by.

Course the truth ain’t so cut and dry, but so long as you give folks a reasonable story, they’re more than happy to believe it. Shows in the faces of the mafiosos around me, and their little leader even gives me a nod of sympathy. “Tough break, but you got a mouth on you kid,” he says, flashing a little grin. “Bet that didn’t help you none with Ron now, did it? Big stickler for respect.” I don’t say nothing, just scowl and glare, and the mini mafioso smiles to see it. “We’ll be in touch.”

And that’s it, as the five of them saunter off leaving me and Cowie in peace. Turning back to glance through the window, I give the manager of the jewellery store a little wave to say I’m alright before heading over to soothe Cowie’s nerves. His blood gets hot, and he needs time to cool down, so I take the scenic route home while considering my options. Eventually, I settle on telling the Sherrif the Mafia done come in to check on me for unknown reasons, and that they seemed curious about what happened in Pleasant Dunes. Makes sense seeing how they were competitors in the mining industry, and I supposed Vanguard National could afford to undercut the Pugliano Family because the use of

chemical explosives meant lower costs for higher yields when it came to raw, unrefined ore.

I'll do that first thing tomorrow morning, then let the Marshal know when I see him Sunday. A quick shower and a short jog later, I make it back to the church just in time for dinner, which to Aunt Ray is about ten minutes too late. Rude to walk in right as everyone is about to eat, but she lets me off with a single stern look. Probably because of the company I was with, as she suspects there something going on between Noora and me. That's Tina's fault for telling Aunt Ray everything that went down in Pleasant Dunes, though I will say Noora ain't been none too shy about showing her intentions. Course, Aunt Ray would have a conniption if she knew what was really going on, and I ain't exactly ready to share. Not until I know more about what's going on between me, Noora, and Josie, though how I'll go about broaching the subject is still a mystery.

Can't really just come out and ask them, "So where's all of this goin' then?" Well I could, but then it might ruin a good thing, and I would really rather not do that just yet.

After dinner, I bring Chrissy and Aunt Ray out for some starmelon cobbler. The fruits ain't ripe just yet, but they still got enough of that peachy fragrance to lend a fresh and fruity taste the pie, and the scoop of ice cream makes up for the lacking natural sugars. We don't stay out for long, because Chrissy's fast

approaching her limits for the day, so we head back to the church where Auntie Ray reads a story for Chrissy out in the pews, one complete with animated Illusions to hold her attention. Easier than interrupting the story every few paragraphs to make sure she ain't lost in her thoughts, which ain't the worst thing in the world, but she spends enough time locked away in her head as it is. The more time she spends engaged out here, the better, because the last thing we need is for her to drift away completely and never emerge from her thoughts again.

Yea, it would've been really nice if Chrissy and Elodie could've been friends. I get the feeling Elodie would've known how to bring Chrissy out of her head and keep her anchored out in the real world. Only took three days for the green haired girlie to get Old Tux acting like a year-old colt again, and I was hoping she'd do something similar for Chrissy. Time was she was every bit as happy and expressive as Tina, though things started changing round about the time she turned six, and not even Uncle Raleigh could keep her engaged for more than a few minutes at a time.

As for me, I stick around for story time too, making sure none of the kids get too rowdy or out of hand while they watch the show. Auntie Ray ain't much for discipline, so they tend to walk all over her, and ain't nothing their parents are doing to keep them in check. I figured most of them would hitch a ride with the convoys to safer pastures in Summerbloom or Irongate, but them Protestants stuck around. Guess they figured one berth was good as any other since they ain't all that bothered by the Mindspire,

and Aunt Ray's cooking is good enough to risk life and limb for. A perfect example of how no good deed goes unpunished, so I play the part of tyrant and shoo the children off to bed after an hour of stories and illusions.

Unfortunately for me, Chrissy is immune to my heavy-handed ways, and insists on a sleepover once again. Still think she's owed one because of my sleep over with Elodie, and since we're staying at the church, I can't really argue it out in front of her where anyone might overhear. Instead, I look to Aunt Ray for help, who takes one look at Chrissy's bright, hope filled eyes and immediately gives in. "How about you just hang out in our room, just until she falls asleep," Aunt whispers, after pulling me away far enough so no one can overhear. "Then you can head out back to your room, simple is as simple does."

I didn't expect her to fold so quickly, and though my first instinct is to reject her suggestion outright, there's something in her expression that makes me think twice. A weight to her smile, a slump in her shoulders, a glint of pleading in her eyes which all comes together to make her look so very tired and resigned. Still lovely as an autumn rose at the tender age of 37, as she's a December baby just like me, but she's been carrying a heavy burden these last few years and it's starting to take a toll. Looking after Chrissy is hard enough without having to worry about Tina and me while we're off doing Lord knows what sort of dangerous work, all while running around putting out social fires wherever she can and promoting a spirit of community as best she can.

And now she got the Mindspire to deal with on top of all that, while maintaining Concentration all day on Mental Fortress so Chrissy don't spend the whole day in catatonic misery. Hasn't even been two weeks yet, and Auntie Ray's already feeling the strain, so if letting Chrissy fall asleep in my room would make things a little more manageable, then why wouldn't she want to try it?

Now my daddy would've stuck to his guns and said it wasn't proper, but me, I can't deny Chrissy anything it seems, because I just love the girl too much. Warms my heart to see her prance off with her mama so they can get ready for bed, and when she shows up in my room in her oversized jammies a few minutes later, she's positively glowing with good cheer. Me, I ain't ready to sleep just yet, as I got some studying to do, which she accepts with stoic aplomb as she slips under the covers with her mama. With the door slightly ajar so nosey nancies can see in, they curl up together and snuggle while I sit at the desk, poring over the Mental Fortress Spell Formula and all the various permutations the numbers experience during their transition from static coordinates to fully functional Spell Structure.

The funny thing is, this is hardly even a sleepover, because if they was on the couch in our den back home, it'd be just another quiet evening at home. That's good enough for Chrissy though, because she just wants to be around the people she loves. I think

Tina's absence is harder on Chrissy than I thought it'd be, and the distance I keep between us weighs heavier on her now that her sister isn't around to help offset it. Might be that not even Chrissy understands why she's been so insistent on this sleepover, but I know for a fact that she's been having trouble falling asleep ever since the Mindspire went up, and it doesn't take her more than ten minutes to nod off in my presence. That's in spite of the open door, the bright light, and my constant page turning while I calculate variables on the fly and go over the formula for the umpteenth time.

The next little break I get, I make ready to head off to the other room, but Aunt Ray waves at me to keep studying, because she ain't ready to sleep just yet either. Pretty sure she just wants to maintain the Mental Fortress Spell for as long as she can, because it'll fade away as soon as she falls asleep and leave Chrissy more or less exposed to the Mindspire's effect. Unfortunately, we're still no closer to a proper solution than we were on day one, or at least I haven't heard of any big developments. All we've done is rule out what doesn't work, which I suppose is progress of a sorts, even if it ain't the kind of progress we need.

The only thing we know that can 100% shut out the Mindspire is a fully encased lead box. Problem is, people need this thing called air to survive, so you gotta come out at some point. Even a ventilation system is enough for the effect to squeak on through, and unlike a Detection Spell, the Mindspire doesn't require it's

Aetheric signal to bounce back and return to sender. It just needs to reach the target, and it don't matter how many times that signal is reduced beforehand by bouncing off of lead, it'll still hit you just as hard as ever.

So I bear down and study the Mental Fortress Spell Formula with everything I got, until all the twist and turns of the honey-combed structure become second nature to me, with little to no time to think in the moment as I calculate variable after variable and plug them into the next line of the formula to get the values I'll need. The moment of success doesn't even register right away as I turn back to page one and get ready to go again, only to realize the scintillating trails of shifting patterns have been embedded into my minds eye, sitting there in memory and ready to access with little more than a word and a thought.

No Somatic or Material component necessary, so I look up and meet Aunty Ray's eyes before extending my hand out towards her. Though she's been sitting there holding Chrissy for who knows how long, she don't bat an eye at my actions, just takes my hand in hers like it's the most natural thing in the world. Takes me a moment to find the right place to start, and when I Intone the first word, it comes out in a drawl. "*Cogito*," I whisper, and Aunty Ray's eyes go wide with surprise, but I focus on the Spell Structure and nothing else, matching the rhythm of my voice to the flow of Aether within. "*Ergo – Sum*."

I think, therefore I am.

The Spell takes effect in an instant, wrapping Aunt Ray's mind in Aetheric bubble wrap to protect the Entanglements connecting her physical mind the metaphysical Immaterium. Or at least that's what I assume it does, because all I really feel is the transmission of Aether moving from my hand into Aunt Ray's. Then, all that's left is a faint inkling of a sensation of something there, something floating at the edges of my consciousness that feels ready to fly away in the blink of an eye. I hold fast to that sensation, a weight lighter than air yet more substantial all the same, a bastion of the mind that I cannot see or touch but is most certainly there. The sensation floats here and there about the edges of my consciousness, and it takes an effort to put it not out of mind, but in the back of it, like a gentle spring breeze singing through the trees, an ever-present and unobtrusive melody that becomes a part of your existence.

Aunt Ray on the other hand experiences the effects of the Spell directly, and she gasps in both relief and delight. Tears spring to her big blue eyes and she presses her lips together in an effort to restrain her joy and jubilation, because for the first time in close to two weeks, the pervasive and vexatious droning of the Mindspire's Dissonant Whistle has been cut down to a whisper. Whenever I step into the church, it feels like my ears have popped, except it's my brain, so I can't imagine how Aunt Ray feels now. Trails of tears stream out from her eyes as she

clutches my hand ever so tightly, I hold her hand just as tight to let her know I'm here.

Yea, she's had it hard the last couple years, maybe even the whole decade, but I'm old enough to help share the load, so she can lean on me a bit more now.

"He'd be so proud of you," she whispers, and my heart aches to hear it, because I ain't sure if it's true. Sure, it's two Big Spells under my belt, but my daddy never put too much stock in Spellslinging. "I'm proud of you," she adds, and that's enough to soothe away the angst, so I smile, squeeze her hand, and stay silent. Sweet woman that she is, she's already thinking of her babies and says, "Tina's gonna be back tomorrow afternoon, so you hold onto one for her. She's been having trouble sleeping too, and she's had to make do without, so I'm sure she'll be grateful for the help. I know it'll be awkward while she's training and what not, but talk to her and see when she's doing time trials and anything competitive. The Mindspire's got her off her game, and she's in danger of losing her spot as top boot."

Aunty Ray has so much more to say, but I'm already shaking my head. "Tina will do fine without," I whisper. "You should keep your Mental Fortress for yourself, until I can't hold it on Chrissy anymore. I can cast it three times, so that's 3 hours base, but 6 with Extend Duration Metamagic, or half the day. I'll work on pushing that even further, but I doubt I'll make much headway any

time soon.” Spells that require Concentration to begin with are much more difficult to maintain after their base duration runs out, because then you have to Concentrate on the Spell itself while simultaneously Concentrating on maintain it. For most, that’s impossible, though I can do it for a little bit. Take Entangle for example, which requires Concentration and has a base duration of one single minute. I can almost hold it for three, which don’t seem like much time, but it takes a phenomenal effort of will to maintain it even for that long.

Which I suppose is why Josie and Noora both seemed so pleased by my efforts. Who would’ve thunk my Spellslinging skills would’ve come in handy like that?

“I know what you doin’,” Aunty Ray whispers, giving me a look that is half proud and half pout. “You trying to toughen Tina up, get her ready for the world, but you going about it all wrong.”

“How so?” Could be I’m pulling my punches too much, but after snapping at her in Pleasant Dunes, I’ve been real worried about shaking her confidence. Sergeant Begaye knows his work, and he ain’t wrong to say she needs more building up rather than tearing down.

“You’re treating her like she’s you,” Aunty Ray whispers, shaking her head ever so slightly. “But she’s not you. She’s Tina, and

whether you like to admit it or not, she's more like Chrissy than anyone else." Patting the bed to tell me to sit, she leans in and I can't help but lean in too until our temples are touching. "You know, before she left, she was all up in arms about how you offered to take Noora and Josie to the gun range, when she been inviting you to go for weeks now." Seeing my sour expression, Aunt Ray giggles and gives me a hard little nudge with her head. "I know why you don't want to go to the range," she says, her eyes a mixture of sorrow and mirth. "I also know why you invited Noora and Josie out."

Bet she doesn't know how it turned out, because even I didn't think that was an option, but Aunt Ray don't ask about my date and I don't volunteer no information. "The thing is," she says, giving me a look to make sure I'm paying attention, "Tina don't understand why you'd want to spend time with other girls instead of her, because she don't understand the difference between familial and romantic love. I know this because when I was her age, I was boy crazy and mooning over every pretty face I see, but she don't seem to care or even notice how every boy in town gets whenever she's around."

I frown, because only now do I understand what Aunt Ray meant when she said Tina's more like Chrissy. "You think Tina's Aether touched too?"

“Oh I know it,” Aunt Ray replies, shaking her head with a smile. “It’s not always a terrible thing. If it wasn’t for your lack of Branding, I’d think you was Aether touched too. You been keeping up with Chrissy’s Spellslinging abilities without breaking a sweat, and she’s one of the most talented young Spellslingers anyone has ever seen. As for Tina, she ain’t as far along, but she ain’t all that far behind either. That ain’t important though. What is important is that you remember this: Tina ain’t all that different from Chrissy when it comes to how they process emotions. Chrissy don’t understand why boys and girls gotta separate, and while Tina accepts that this is how it’s gotta be, she don’t understand it either. That’s why she gets all upset when you won’t hug her, but let Noora slip her arms around you without so much as a twitch. She don’t see why you don’t want to hug her, but will go off and hug other women, because romance don’t make no sense to her. All she knows is love, and she most certainly loves you.”

That’s a big revelation to chew on this late in the night, and Aunt Ray lets me sit with my thoughts for a good long minute before speaking again. “I ain’t saying you shouldn’t date,” she whispers, giving my hand a squeeze that is just a touch too hard to tell me she wants to hear about my date, but the thing is, she really doesn’t. Or at least she wouldn’t if she knew what went down, which is a bit of a paradox, now isn’t it. “I ain’t telling you to date Tina neither, because that ain’t gonna solve nothing. I’m just letting you know so you’ll be more patient and understanding with her. You’ve always been her big brother, the closest man to her

since her daddy and uncle Ming passed, and she doesn't understand why you're pushing her away all of a sudden."

I sit and think about it for another minute, then ask, "She really don't understand why Danny gets all red and moon-eyed around her?" Aunt Ray nods, and I heave a small sigh for my best buddy. "I thought she was just pretending not to notice so they could stay friends." Another pause, then, "Should I tell her?"

Aunt Ray lights up to hear it. "Ooh, maybe. I like Danny. He a right proper little gentleman, and he works hard as you. Better than those wulves lurking around her in Basic. Tina don't get how most are only acting friendly in hopes of getting close and becoming more. Ain't so terrible a thing, but I'm worried they'll mistake her friendliness for leading them on and react poorly if she rejects them." Now it's Aunt Ray's turn to sigh as she hugs the sleeping Chrissy that much tighter. "Ain't saying all men are monsters, but those closest to you are the ones who can hurt you the most. That's the nature of betrayal after all, and I'm worried Tina won't see none of it coming."

Though Aunt Ray don't say it, I know she would feel a lot better if I were there with her in Basic. And in the Rangers too after the fact, but that ship has long since sailed and there ain't no getting back on. As for me and my life, it's looking more complicated than ever. Knew the woman I eventually ended up with was gonna have to accept my bond with Chrissy, but now, not only do I have

two paramours in Josie and Noora, I've gotta let them know that Tina might be a part of the package too.

Don't think there are any songs about a love like that, but I suppose I could always write one.